

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL JAY LINDELL,
USAF, COMMANDER, COMBINED AIR POWER TRANSITION FORCE, COMBINED SECURITY
TRANSITION COMMAND -- AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: BUILDING THE AFGHAN AIR CORPS
MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF OF NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE:
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2007

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MR. HOLT: With us on the Bloggers Roundtable this morning, Brigadier
General Jay Lindell, the commander of Combined Air Power Transition Force with
the coalition -- let's see if I can get this right now -- coalition -- CSTC-A --
with Afghanistan. (Laughs.) Sorry.

So, sir, do you have an opening statement for us?

GEN. LINDELL: Jack, I sure do, and I'll give you a few minutes here of
an opening statement if you're ready.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Yes, sir, we are ready.

GEN. LINDELL: Well, good evening from Kabul, Afghanistan. And I'm
Brigadier General Jay Lindell, and I'm very happy to talk to you this evening
about the Afghan air corps and I want to thank you for your interest. My job is
to lead the Combined Air Power Transition Force -- Afghanistan, which is the air
component of the Combined Security Transition Command -- Afghanistan. I work
for the commanding general of CSTC-A, Major General Cone, who reports directly
to the commander of U.S. Central Command.

The mission of the Combined Air Power Transition Force is to help the
Afghan National Army build the Afghan air corps. And note that I said the
Afghan air corps. It is not a separate air force, but it is one of six corps
assigned to the Afghan National Army. The air corps mission is to provide
trained and ready airmen and soldiers to execute critical tasks from the air in
support of the Afghan National Army, and, when directed by the Afghan general
staff, to support by air the civil authorities of Afghanistan at all levels.

To get the mission done, they'll have a team of approximately 130
personnel from all services of the military, and soon we'll have two Canadians
on my staff. I've been in country nearly 60 days and am on a one year
assignment. The people of the Combined Air Power Transition Force work daily
with our Afghan air corps counterparts to build air capability. Most of what
the Afghan air corps needs are resources: aircraft, spare parts and maintenance
support equipment. We work to acquire the resources through the Defense Security
Assistance Command and through a donation process of willing countries.
Additionally, we advise and mentor the Afghan air corps personnel on doctrine
and development of command and control procedures for the air corps. We also do

a lot of training through task demonstration with the Afghan personnel. The tasks range from basic maintenance and inspection procedures to proper handling of cargo aboard an aircraft.

Currently, the Afghan air corps has very little capability: they have seven Mi-17s, which are troop-carrying, mobility helo aircraft; six Mi-35s, which are attack helos; an Antonov-32 and Antonov-26 aircraft, a total of two each, so that's a total of four fixed-wing air mobility aircraft. In addition, they have two L-39 training jets that are only used to fly locally for aerial demonstrations and for the national day parade once every year. Besides lacking aircraft, they lack quality spare parts and common bench stock items. They also have very little support equipment to maintain aircraft. But what they do have, they use exceptionally well and are extremely innovative at fixing aircraft.

The Afghan air corps has ability and desire. They need resources to give them capability. And that's what we are doing, we are boosting their capability rapidly. Some of the specifics include six Mi-17s and six Mi-35 helicopters that we will acquire from the Czech Republic, one Mi-17 from Slovakia, and two Mi-17s from the -- or 10 Mi-17s from the United Arab Emirates. We are also purchasing four Antonov-32 aircraft from the Ukraine. All of these aircraft should be here in Kabul in the next six months, so we are rapidly expanding the Afghan air corps capability. Additionally, we will purchase through a foreign military sales program refurbished Western medium lift aircraft, and we hope to have the first aircraft here in mid-year 2009. As we rapidly expand the Afghan air corps, we will also be working with the air corps to expand logistical support activity. This includes training from donor countries and the development of a formal training center, primarily focused on aviation maintenance skill sets.

Although there are many challenges to build the Afghan air corps, the outlook is positive. The Afghans have the desire and motivation to learn, grow and develop, and they want to rid their country of the Taliban. They are very gracious for everything that we do and for what the American people contribute to their air corps. They want a better life and a better life for their children. With our continued support, the Afghan air corps will develop into a fully capable, self-sustaining, and independent air corps capable of meeting the security needs of Afghanistan.

Again, I thank you for your interest and I'm willing to take any questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir. Charlie Quidnunc, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started.

Q Yes, General, this is Charlie Quidnunc at the Wizbang Podcast. My question deals with Secretary Gates' remarks in Heidelberg last week where he said that caveats are a problem in Afghanistan, where countries are only willing to do certain activities. Have you experienced any of that in your support of the air corps?

GEN. LINDELL: Charlie, there are countries that have better capabilities to perform certain tasks. And I tell you, especially with our NATO allies, medical capabilities and medical training they want to contribute to and they'd prefer to orient training and donations in medical equipment. And that's great. We'll take anything that they'll give us. And so, yes, they do have a preference for things that they do want to donate and training they would like to give to the Afghans.

Q And are there things they won't do that are a problem?

GEN. LINDELL: I haven't experienced with the Afghan air corps to date, but, again, we have just recently released a list of donor training and donor items for the countries, and we've got some feedback already from some countries, but nothing that says we can't donate this.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Andrew Lubin. Q General, yes, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Calvary On Point. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us. Sir, what do you -- how do you train the Afghan pilots then if some of the jets are flying once a year, I mean, do you put them in the electronic trainers or what do they do the other 364 days?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, Andrew, good question. The Afghans are very capable actually flying. Their current air corps has, here in Kabul, 165 pilots. Now, the average age of those pilots is 43, and the average experience level is approximately 2,500 hours. So they are actually very capable pilots. They aren't too current. That's why we need to get them aircraft to fly in.

They also have their own instructors, and they have their own syllabus training programs modeled right after the Russian system because many of these pilots were trained in the former Soviet Union. So they are actually very capable, you might say, day under good weather condition pilots. So as we give them these aircraft, they'll be able to train themselves with their own instructors and quickly generate capability.

Now, what they do lack is tactical capability, and we're going to work through our -- hopefully, through some either mobile training teams from NATO countries, specifically eastern NATO countries that have the same aircraft and equipment, to come in and help them focus better at tactical capability.

Q Okay. Can we follow up, Jack?

MR. HOLT: Sure, go ahead.

Q General, what do you -- I appreciate that. What are you doing or what are they doing to bringing younger pilots, because 43- year-old -- an average age of 43 is, I guess, not a plus when you're flying through Afghanistan?

GEN. LINDELL: Yeah, you know, you're exactly right. We've got to grow youth into the Afghan air corps, and we are currently working out a plan to do that. We need to start in about a two-year time to start bringing youth into the program. It will be small numbers initially, but we think that we will build an organic pilot training capability here. That's a few years out yet, but we're counting on these pilots that we have now to at least jumpstart the Afghan air corps, to get at least five years of flying from them, and probably, on the outside, maybe eight years on some of these pilots. So, you're exactly right. This Afghan air corps will not sustain itself unless we start bringing in youth into the corps, and we will do that.

Q Are you pulling them out of the ANA or are you able to pull them out of the Afghan university system?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, it's that -- we are primarily looking at the Afghan National Military Academy, and the first graduating class is 2009, and we will have personnel. Now, it's going to be a small class. I think they're projecting 90 to graduate total. And the Afghan air corps will get at least 10 percent. We hope to get more out of that class, and hopefully, all will screen to go to pilot training.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Christian Lowe.

Q Thanks, General. This is Christian Lowe from Military.com. One quick clarification question -- you said that you're trying to supply the Afghan air corps with refurbished medium lift aircraft by 2009. What will those aircraft be? GEN. LINDELL: Well, we're working through the -- for military sales process for those aircraft. And we're letting our experts in the States determine what aircraft that will be. There are some very good aircraft on the market, two-engine capability with short takeoff and landing and unimproved strip that, you know, will suit the Afghan air corps quite well. And I'll tell you, an aircraft that we've been looking at from here, as far as meeting their capability, is the C-27A models from Alenia in Italy. And it's a very good candidate for the Afghan air corps.

Q Okay, thanks. And my main question here is I'm curious that this seems like sort of a no-brainer. Why did it take so long to start working on this Afghan air corps? I mean, you said you got there just recently. What have been we been doing since then?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, there was -- yeah, that's a good question. You're exactly right. Well, when we first started building the Afghan national security forces and it was through the people on the ground, through the Defense Reform Directorate here, the first and most pressing need was presence, boots on the ground, for the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army, to equip and train them, and have a presence of security with faces and boots on the ground. So we are actually now, in the last couple years, bringing resources to the air corps.

Now, we have been working hard on infrastructure. And we have some great facilities right here at Kabul Airport that will completed this year. And we will move the air corps headquarters from where they are in the south side of Kabul Airport to brand new facilities over on the north side. And those facilities will be a tremendous asset. They're looking well, they're meeting their schedule, and the Afghan air corps, when they get their new aircraft or their refurbished aircraft here, can move into the new facilities, they're just going to launch off the ground and take off with capability. And that infrastructure was set up through -- more than two years ago with building the foundation here. So there has been some work on the infrastructure piece. It takes a long time. It just isn't the aircraft on the ramp.

Q Okay. Jack, can I -- do you mind if I ask another quick question?

MR. HOLT: Sure, go ahead.

Q And, General, can you explain to us how the establishment of this corps will change the way the Afghan army operates and confronts its security challenges? I mean, what will be the tangible benefit of this?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, I tell you, when you look at the country of Afghanistan, with the limited road structure, there is no rail capacity. Just the ability to move logistics by air will be a tremendous enabler capability to the army. Additionally, the ability to MEDEVAC personnel directly to their regional corps hospitals. You know, and I can quote Major General Cone here, the boss, who said just the fact that we have that soldiers will know that there's a MEDEVAC capability that will take care of them will boost their fighting confidence and their capability by over 10 percent. And that is one of those intangibles: just the fact that they know they have that capability, an Afghan national capability, to do MEDEVAC will be a tremendous asset for them. And to get them supplies by air to their regional corps supply centers instead of the time it takes by road.

Q Okay. Thanks a lot.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Somebody else had joined us. Who else got on board?

Q Hello, this is John Donovan. But I'm afraid everyone's asked all the questions that I had.

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) Okay. Well, is there anything else?

Q Well, I'll ask a follow-up real quick on this. You talked about MEDEVAC and logistics capability. You mentioned earlier that you had Afghan National Army soldiers that were part of this corps. Are they sort of like an airborne corps? I mean, are these shooters that are trained specifically to do aerial delivery, sort of, military operations? And will there be a kinetic side of --

GEN. LINDELL: No. No. Yeah. You know, the Afghan air corps is part of the Afghan National Army. So in essence, we refer to air corps personnel as airmen, in essence, they're all soldiers initially coming into the air corps because they're all one blended in with the Afghan National Army. And as I've stated in my opening statement, they're just an enabling corps as part of the national army.

Q Okay. Thank you.

Q Jack, can I follow up?

MR. HOLT: Sure, go ahead.

Q General, Andrew Lubin again. You basically said the Afghan air force kind of runs like the old army-air force did in World War II then -- I take it?

GEN. LINDELL: Well, that's probably a pretty good point, Andrew. Yeah, exactly like that.

Q Okay, good. And actually what I want to ask -- you mentioned that you have some attack helicopters. Are they going out on missions with the Americans or are they still in training? GEN. LINDELL: The attack helos that we have now are all centered here in Kabul. And they do fly -- most of their missions are training, however, they do escort missions right now with the Mi-17s that are also flying out of Kabul. The Mi-17s are their troop carrying and cargo capacity helos, and they do escort missions right now with those aircraft.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And anyone else?

Q The only question I have is could we get a digital copy of the General's opening statement?

MR. HOLT: I will see what we can do. It should be on our transcript when we get it, but we'll see what we can do here. And General, do you have any closing thoughts for us.

GEN. LINDELL: Hey, I sure do, Jack. You know, I'm one to say that I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you. I hope you better understand that Afghanistan is a country of great promise, hope and a bright future. However, they need our help. And the Afghan people have put a lot of faith in America and the American soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who are working hard to bring security to the people of Afghanistan. There's a lot going on in this country, a lot more than I thought of before I got here. In regards to security improvement, the Afghan army is engaged in the fight and they are getting stronger everyday. They have taken the lead in many operations and the air corps' building capability. It's just a thrill for me to work with the outstanding people of the Combined Security Transition Command -- Afghanistan and the Afghan government. There is a bright future ahead, and I'm just proud to be apart of it. So I thank you very much for your time.

MR. HOLT: All right. We thank you very much, Brigadier General Jay Lindell, Commander of Combined Air Power Transition Force for the Combined Security Transition Command -- Afghanistan. Thank you very much for being with us, and hopefully we can check back in here, maybe in a few weeks, and see how things are progressing with you.

GEN. LINDELL: No problem, Jack. We'll do that.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, General. I appreciate the time.

GEN. LINDELL: Thank you.

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